



## THE ROLE OF COMPETITIVE DEBATING IN SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE BUILDING AMONG ESL LEARNERS IN TUNISIA

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The political scene in Tunisia has drastically changed since the 2011 revolution. It has paved the way for free expression to become an essential component applicable to everyday life. It was thus fundamental to introduce competitive debating as a tool necessary to mediate and organize free speech inside educational practices. Although debating is not officially integrated into the Tunisian national curriculum, it has been adopted by ESL teachers because it has the power to radically transform English language instruction and reception. Indeed, debating has become an absolute necessity in building analytical and reflective learners who are also socially and politically conscious. While a plethora of anecdotal evidence exists on the importance of debating, no previous work has closely examined the role of competitive debating in Tunisia in creating better-skilled and more knowledgeable ESL learners. First, this paper investigates a case study of 18 Tunisian ESL learners aged 15-18 who participated in a local school tournament in December 2017. This one-day tournament consisted of two rounds before the finale where debaters spoke for 8 minutes and received feedback from 6 adjudicators. I base my paper on empirical evidence to showcase the efficacy of competitive debating, as a pedagogical tool, in supporting students in acquiring the methodology that would enable them, as speakers, to better formulate arguments and express opinions. Second, a survey was used to gather data from a larger group of 56 Tunisian ESL learners aged 14-25 who attended debate training sessions and/or partook in local and/or national competitions. In my paper, I tackle the importance of debate in bolstering learners' confidence as non-native speakers, enhancing their critical thinking skills and widening their knowledge. Among others, the results reveal that there is a significant improvement in the aforementioned areas, especially among more experienced debaters.

**Keywords:** Skills, Knowledge, Debate, ESL, Tunisia.

### Introduction

Modern day formal education has the enormous task of remaining relevant to millennials also known as Generation Y. It is competing with the luring invention that is the Internet. Chu et al. describe the dominating atmosphere of modern day schools: "Many schools have inevitably become soulless factories that demotivate, bore, and frustrate their students, who may never have the opportunity in school to realize the most valuable asset of humanity: a love for learning, facilitated by pursuit of one's curiosity through inquiry. (Chu et al. 5)

Teachers are thus in a constant quest for new pedagogies and strategies that enable them to harness their students' motivation and impart them with the inter/intrapersonal skills they need today. Such skills include communication, critical and creative thinking, teamwork, leadership and core confidence.

Teachers are also seeking to activate their students' citizenship and build their knowledge of the world. The methods should be stimulating and rewarding. The following study proposes competitive debating as a unique experience for learners to acquire the aforementioned key skills.

## Debate

### Definition

Debate is a valuable educational tool. It combines “logical thinking” and “clear expression” (Shurter 11). The basis of every debate is argumentation. Creating an argument can be “one of the most complex cognitive acts that a person can engage in” (Parcher 1). Argumentation should be founded on prior research, data collection, organization, synthesis, evaluation, and selection. An argument should be structured to include an explanation and an illustration of what is claimed to be true. It needs to exist within a case-winning strategy. It is constantly under the threat of rebuttal and refutation as it can be rebuilt and reinforced. Debate requires a great deal of practice. It is especially challenging because it “requires conversion between thought, written rhetoric, and oral rhetoric” (Parcher 1-2).

### Formats

In order to debate, students need to be familiar with the debating format. Various debate formats exist in the world and they differ according to the region, age category, and tournament. In Tunisia, high school pupils debate in World Schools Format (WS) while university students debate in British Parliamentary Style (BPS). In WS, two teams *proposition* and *opposition* debate a motion. A motion is a statement that is expectedly controversial, relatable and balanced. A motion is usually formulated in the following fashions: *This house believes that... This house would... This house regrets..... This house, as X, would .....* The teams, each composed of 3 debaters, do not pick sides but rather allow the draw to choose one for them. They are usually allocated one hour to prepare an impromptu motion. Although they are denied access to the Internet, they are allowed to check dictionaries to help them understand unfamiliar keywords. The speakers speak in rotation. Each speaker speaks once for no more than 8 minutes except for the first or the second speaker who can also deliver the reply speech which is up to 4 minutes. The following table explains the rotation system.

**Table 1.** Roles Rotation in World Schools Format

Order	Time	Speaker
1 <sup>st</sup> speech	8'	1 <sup>st</sup> Prop
2 <sup>nd</sup> speech	8'	1 <sup>st</sup> Opp
3 <sup>rd</sup> speech	8'	2 <sup>nd</sup> Prop
4 <sup>th</sup> speech	8'	2 <sup>nd</sup> Opp
5 <sup>th</sup> speech	8'	3 <sup>rd</sup> Prop
6 <sup>th</sup> speech	8'	3 <sup>rd</sup> Opp
7 <sup>th</sup> speech / Reply Speech	4'	1 <sup>st</sup> or 2 <sup>nd</sup> Opp
8 <sup>th</sup> speech / Reply Speech	4'	1 <sup>st</sup> or 2 <sup>nd</sup> Prop

In BPS, debaters have 15 minutes to prepare the impromptu motion and are expected to deliver 7-minute speeches. There are four teams *Opening Government*, *Closing Government* on one side and *Opening Opposition*, *Closing Opposition* on the other side. The table below explains the roles.

**Table 2.** Roles Rotation in British Parliamentary Style

Order	Position	Bench	Order	Position	Bench
1 <sup>st</sup> speaker	Prime Minister	Opening Government	2 <sup>nd</sup> speaker	Leader of Opposition	Opening Opposition
3 <sup>rd</sup> speaker	Deputy Prime Minister		4 <sup>th</sup> speaker	Deputy Leader of Opposition	
5 <sup>th</sup> speaker	Government Member	Closing Government	6 <sup>th</sup> speaker	Opposition Member	Closing Opposition
7 <sup>th</sup> speaker	Government Whip		8 <sup>th</sup> speaker	Opposition Whip	

## Debate Competition

### Local Tournament

The local tournament was a one-day competition that gathered 18 high school students aged 15-18 in Ghardimaou High School in Jendouba located in the North West of Tunisia. The tournament took place on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of December in 2017 and aimed at encouraging high school pupils to debate topics revolving around corruption. Although the theme was known to the debaters, the motions were only revealed on the day of the tournament. During the two first rounds, debaters were allocated one hour as preparation time. As for the final round, they were allocated only 30 minutes.

**Table 3.** Rounds and Motions in North West Tournament

Round	Motion
Round1	This house believes that bribery is sometimes acceptable. This house would compel all Tunisian police officers to use a body camera while on duty.
Round 2	<i>Info Slide: a body camera is a tiny machine that, when taped to the uniform, records all the activities of the police officers for inspection and accountability.</i>
Final Round	This house would dedicate a percentage of energy revenues to the regions containing wells and mines.

## Rules

There exist manuals that standardize rules and aim at guiding the debater throughout international tournaments. In the local tournament, the debaters were reminded of these rules at the opening session where they also had the opportunity to be introduced to one another and witness the draw of the teams.

During the debate, speakers are not allowed to address one another in forms other than the speech or during a point of information (POI). POIs are an integral part of debating and they can be addressed between the 1<sup>st</sup> minute and last minute of the opponent's speech. The speaker chooses whether to accept or decline the POI and it is imperative that the person who asked a POI respect the decision.

All debaters are expected to behave in a correct and fitting manner, for example, they should not engage in distracting behaviour, use props, barrack other speakers with POIs or exceed the time allocated to them.

### **Feedback**

The 18 debaters were composed of 8 girls and 10 boys whose debate experience varies between 1 and 3 years. They formed their teams independently prior to the competition whereby each team has 3 members. During every round, they were judged by highly qualified adjudicators who gave them speaker points ranging between 65 and 80 based on specific criteria *strategy*, *style* and *content*; but most importantly they gave them feedback about their performance. It is noteworthy that the adjudicators are not allowed to make comments about the language mistakes that the debater may commit since the objective of debating is not to correct grammar but to improve oral, argumentation and rhetoric skills. In this context, Kira G. Morse (2011) writes:

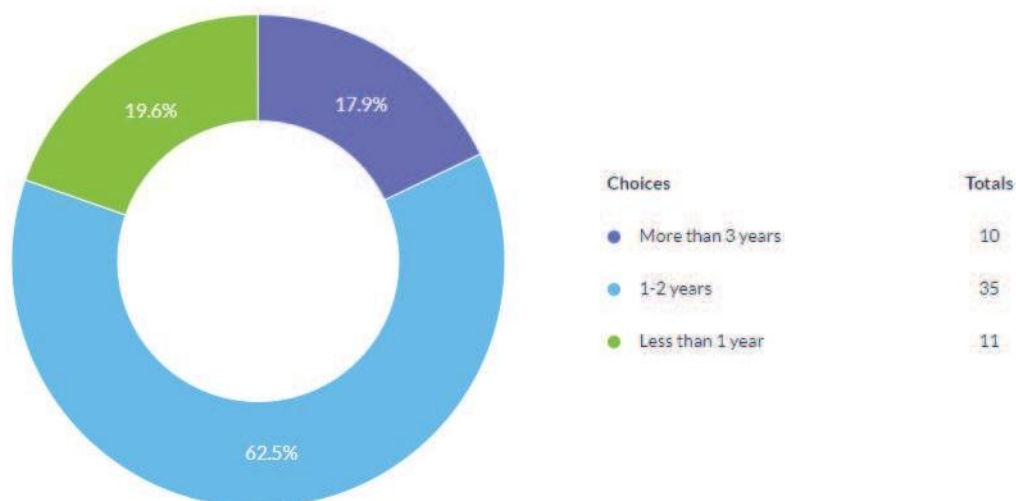
Using debate programs and ideas in bilingual programs, as well as in ESL and EFL settings, provides opportunities beyond traditional teaching methods. Students are focused on the content, rather than on the details of grammar or tests in writing. This focus takes away from the possible lack of second language confidence. In fact, it encourages native and non-native speakers alike to work together in achieving particular content goals. (110)

The debaters are expected to take notes when the adjudicators are giving feedback and strive to apply the needed changes in the next round.

### **Data Collection and Procedure**

At the end of each round, adjudicators assign speaker points to debaters to evaluate their performance. Then, the tab master keeps scores of the debating teams to determine which one gets to compete in the final round. Written consent was obtained from the organizers of the competition to collect the data generated from individual scores or speaker points.

The debate clubs were installed in high schools and universities across Tunisia thanks to the collaboration between the British Council and the Ministry of Education. Debaters were not recruited based on their English language proficiency; they were rather presented with an extracurricular activity that welcomes those who are interested in debating in English. The survey was thus piloted with a group of 56 high school and university students belonging to those clubs. Eligibility criteria included students between the age of 14-25 who belong to the debating community in Tunisia and who partook in debating events such as training sessions, local tournaments and/or national championships. The following chart describes the participants' debate experience



**Figure 1.** Participants' debate experience

The survey solicits the students' opinions on debating. Oral informed consent was obtained from the participants before the initiation of data collection.

The online survey contains 11 varied questions (Radio buttons, checkboxes, and Likert scale) dissected into 6 main sections:

Section 1: Background Information (age, gender, debate experience)

Section 2: Motivation

Section 3: Debate workshops Vs EFL Coursebook

Section 4: Acquired skills

Section 5: Acquired knowledge

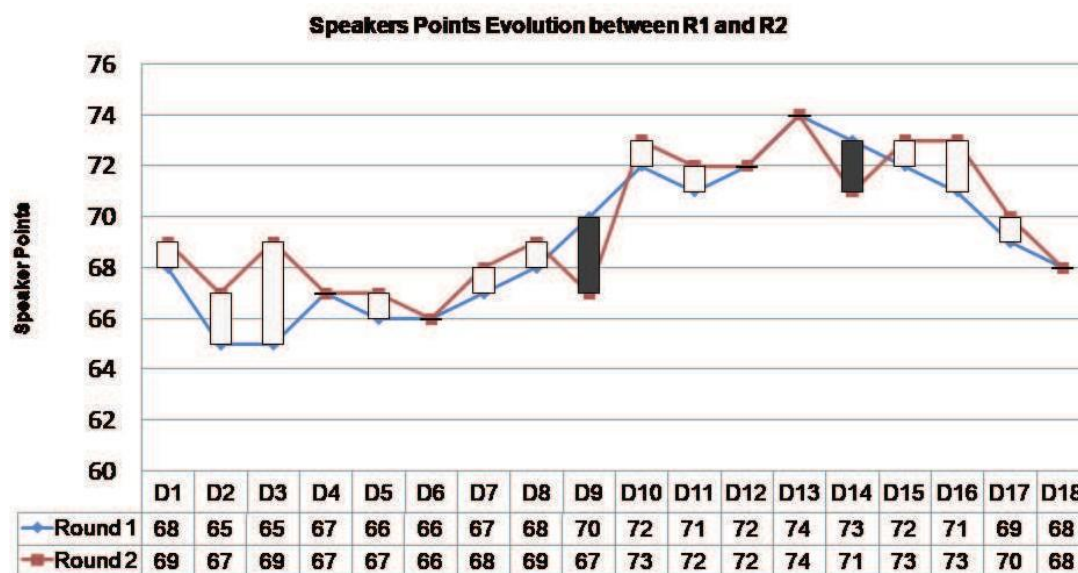
Section 6: Engagement and Interaction

The respondents were not only cooperative but also optimistic because no prior research in Tunisia has generated data about the effect of debating in the building of Tunisian students in terms of skills and knowledge.

## Data Analysis

### Tournament

Speaker points were compared on the premise that debaters evolve after listening to the feedback provided by the judges. The following chart shows that 66.6% of the debaters improved between round 1 and round 2. Four debaters had the same points while two debaters regressed.



**Figure 2.** Effect of feedback on the improvement of debate performances between the two first rounds

The students showed great interest in receiving personal feedback from adjudicators regardless of the results. Overall, the students were engaged with the motions and persisted in rectifying their errors.

## Survey

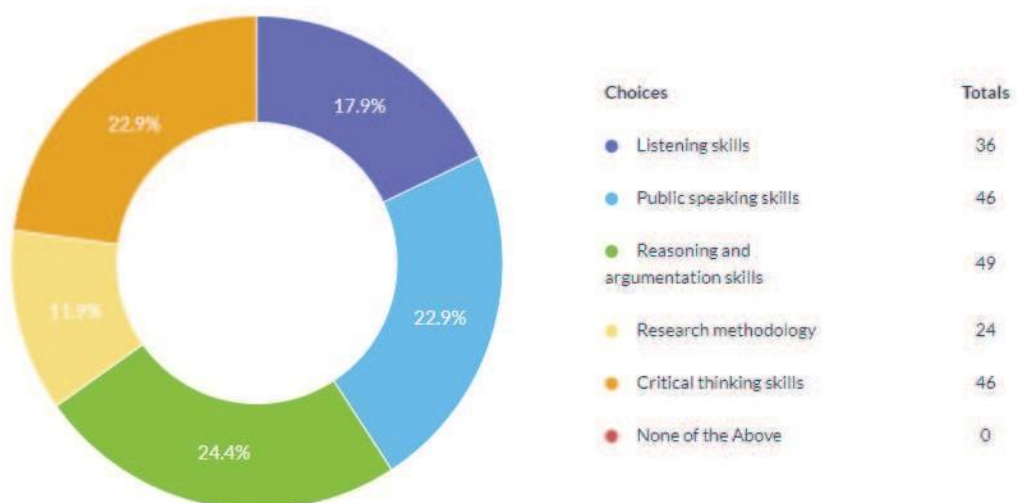
Students from the debating community were asked a variety of questions pertaining to motivation, self-confidence, and engagement. The answers are summarized in the following table

**Table 4.** Effect of debate on motivation, self- expression, confidence and community engagement

Percentage	Answer
94.6	- Prefer the content of debate sessions and workshops over the content of the Tunisian textbooks of English.
	- Believe that becoming a debater helped them express opinions better.
	- Are most motivated during competitions and debate championships.
91.1	-speak more confidently in English thanks to debating
78.6	- Became more engaged in their communities

A debate session provides students with more engaging content. It also creates a creative learning environment that fosters motivation and empowers students to speak up regardless of their level of English.

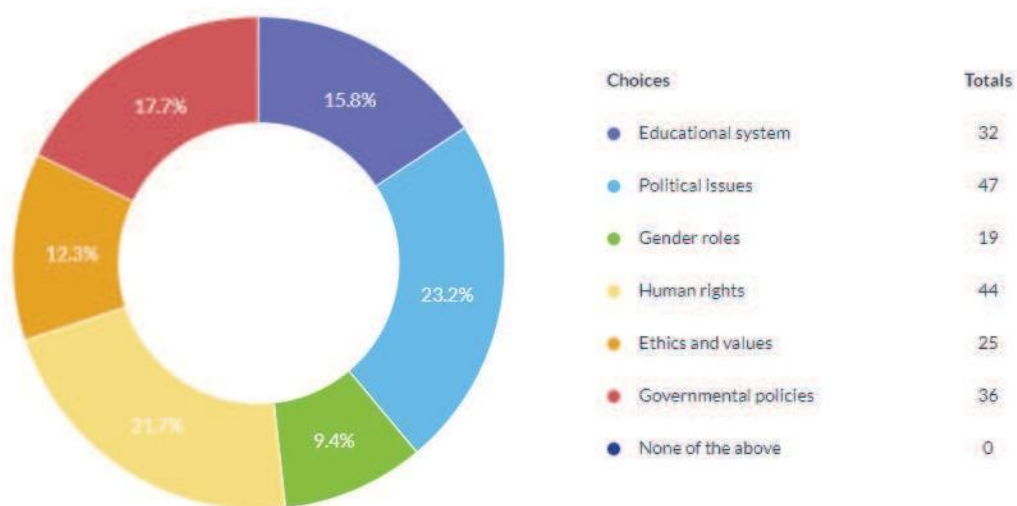
The participants were asked to select the skills they have acquired according to their experience. Results show that reasoning and argumentation skills were ranked as a top skill. Public speaking and critical thinking skills were ranked second followed by listening skills and lastly research methodology. The following chart represents the total number of votes for each skill.



**Figure 3.** Skills gained in debating

When asked about the different topics students became more knowledgeable about, they ranked political issues first then human rights, governmental policies, educational system, ethics and values and lastly gender roles.

The option “none of the above” in the two last questions shows 0 votes which means that all participants believed that they have gained at least one skill and became more informed about at least one thematic throughout their debating experience.



**Figure 4.** Range of knowledge gained in deb

### Researcher Observation

Debating experience can be a major factor in winning or losing a tournament, but it is not the only factor. The power of feedback is uniquely beneficial. The data provided in this research shows the general



evolution of speaker points after every feedback. In fact, students become more equipped with argumentation skills which imply creative and critical thinking. Students are timelier in delivering their speeches and provide stronger rebuttals thanks to their enhanced listening skills. They are less afraid of confrontation and they engage more in POIs.

Because it is a theme-based debate tournament, students were able to expand their knowledge about corruption. Their research enabled them to critically deal with the varied motions. Different teams had the opportunity to strategically work together and benefit from each others' experiences. Students with less debating experience were able to overcome their struggle with public speaking, strengthen their command of the English language and articulate their ideas in a more structured way.

After joining debate sessions, workshops and tournaments, students became more knowledgeable about political issues and governmental policies, human rights and gender roles, educational problems, ethics and values. Becoming more informed helped students become more engaged within their communities proving that debating is tightly linked to reanimating citizenship and activating leadership.

## **Discussion**

Results show that 2 out of 18 students did not perform better after feedback which is understandable. Students with minor or no debating experience may be intimidated by the new learning environment. In fact, they can be confused about their roles and may forget the rules of the debate which ultimately affects their scores. When asked about the reason, the two students admitted that they were overpowered by stress which affected their performance during the debate.

Three students preferred textbook courses over the content delivered in debate sessions which can be linked to a predictable resistance to reforms and curricular changes. Indeed, debate sessions involve both theory and practice and may last more than regular English language sessions. Students who are accustomed to receptive teaching methods feel more at ease in regular classes where the teacher is the locus of knowledge. In such classes, students are not encouraged to work in teams, make extensive research or deliver speeches. While the situation is more comfortable, it is less challenging and therefore less demanding.

## **Implications and Conclusions**

The current study demonstrates the transformative power of debate. Student debaters are more self-confident because they are compelled to be well-read on diverse topics. They listen to new ideas even if they are against their own convictions. They think quickly and respond with exemplified arguments built after training and research. Debaters actively think about how policies can affect people on a daily basis. They also think about the mechanisms behind policies and whether its harms outweigh its benefits.

Education practitioners and reformers can refer to this research when seeking empirical social scientific evidence for the effectiveness of debating in building the knowledge and skills of ESL learners in Tunisia. For the teachers who are looking for new strategies to sharpen their students' 21<sup>st</sup>-century skills or who simply wish to motivate their students, they can start by transforming their classrooms into debate venues. Struggling students can be enlightened about the benefits of competitive debating by reading about the opinions of other Tunisian students whose educational paths were positively changed thanks to debating. In the context of a post-revolution Tunisia, competitive debating is both a vital and urgent educational intervention that can ultimately transform students into agents of change.



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